4-1-2007

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Legacy (1993) represents a high point in Church films imitating Hollywood moviemaking but departs from conventional films by not maintaining its focus on the main character. The fate of Eliza Morley (Kathleen Beller) is swallowed up in the drama of the early Mormons. A possible LDS film style emerges as viewers are led to identify not with a protagonist but with the body of striving believers and their united onward progress. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
Toward a Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic
Film Styles in Legacy

Thomas J. Lefler and Gideon O. Burton

Latter-day Saints aspire to movies that enhance, rather than undermine, their spiritual lives and that respect their religious convictions. However, discussion among Mormons about film tends to focus primarily on content—the presence of inappropriate content or the desire for more family-friendly subjects. Mormons are not alone in looking to film as a way of powerfully presenting religious themes and ideas. Biblical films, for example, have been a staple from the beginning of motion pictures. However, a film’s content is not its only religious dimension. Many films that portray ostensibly religious subjects, argues film theorist Michael Bird, “have too often erred precisely in their disregard for the medium’s stylistic virtues.” What is required in “a cinematic theology,” he contends, “is a consideration of how the style of film can enable an exploration of the sacred.” Bird echoes Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who has been similarly critical of art having religious content but rendered in a nonreligious style. Like other arts, film is not simply a medium for a message; a movie’s form is essential to what it is and what it does.

Films draw us into imaginative worlds (fictional or otherwise), and they offer us an experience “that either confirms, challenges, or transforms the world of our own construction.” Whether or not a film has religious content or spiritual aspirations, it always constructs and draws willing viewers into a temporary yet powerful world that sustains their attention through vivid images and sounds. This sensorial and psychological immersion can lead the mind and influence the soul, and those effects stem directly from how the film is constructed. A movie’s cinematic techniques do not simply serve an idea; they create vividly felt vicarious experience. Tillich’s taxonomy of religious art suggests that a work of art may have an
overt religious theme (he mentions the *Madonna* of Rubens), yet its style may prevent viewers from making important religious connections. (The style Rubens used, he claims, works against Catholic belief about Mary.) Similarly, a film may have an overt religious message but undercut its own purposes in how it presents itself, or the presentation may enhance an unworthy message. Whatever a film’s content, its style has emotional and spiritual dimensions. In some ways, the values that are implicit in the way a film communicates may have more impact than any explicit messages a film may attempt to convey.

Because the medium is so central to the message, those who are concerned about the spiritual qualities of movies need to become aware and critical of films’ methods. The content of movies deserves ongoing, careful consideration, but attention should also go toward cinematic form and the effects and functions of a filmmaker’s stylistic choices. While variations and alternatives exist, today the Hollywood film has set the standard for movie aesthetics. The artistry and success of contemporary films continue to be measured against this dominant style. Just what is the “Hollywood style”? Is this style adequate for spiritual purposes? If not, are there filmmaking forms, structures, and devices that when matched with Mormon theology could help express the most deeply held convictions and spiritual strivings of the Latter-day Saints? These are questions to consider in analyzing any film but are particularly interesting when looking at a major Church film such as *Legacy*. That movie both conforms to and departs from the conventional Hollywood style of film in important ways.

In 1993, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints premiered its first showcase historical film, *Legacy*, in a special theater constructed for its exhibition in the newly remodeled Joseph Smith Memorial Building. For six years, hourly screenings of *Legacy* gave Temple Square visitors the opportunity to experience early LDS Church history from its foundation in upstate New York in the 1830s to the laying of the Salt Lake Temple capstone in Utah in 1893. The Church has told its own story through film since *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* in 1913, but never before in such cinematic grandeur. In *Legacy*, director Kieth Merrill succeeded in creating a film whose production values were on par with Hollywood spectacles. Although shorter than most feature films (53 minutes), *Legacy’s* narrative span and visual scope were epic in nature, and through this film the Latter-day Saints’ story came across larger than life through 65mm film projected onto a near-IMAX-sized screen in its spacious new surround-sound theater.

While the Church makes no attempt to compete with mainstream films commercially, it has in many ways imitated Hollywood-style films...
artistically, and Legacy epitomizes this effort. Even though its budget did not approach that of most Hollywood films, the production compares admirably with mid-range mainstream feature films. Its panoramic views of wagon trains compare to a John Ford western like The Searchers (1956) or to Gone with the Wind (1939) as the trudging pioneers rise into silhouette against an orange sky, dramatically filling the screen. Like such films, Legacy has authentic sets, period costumes, and a large cast to match the Hollywood style. In Legacy, the Mormon exodus is compellingly portrayed through visual and auditory splendor. Its makers have taken advantage of every aspect of cinematic spectacle currently available, including the uncommon large-format screen that is stories high. Legacy employs the full range of components that characterize the best of Hollywood moviemaking.

Given the predominance of film within contemporary culture and the broad familiarity of Hollywood fare, it is unsurprising that the Church would attempt to create films in a manner most familiar to its audiences. Elder John H. Groberg, commenting on the adaptation of his missionary memoir to the screen (The Other Side of Heaven [2001]), remarked, “The scriptures say the Lord speaks to each generation according to its own language. . . . And for good or for evil, the language of a lot of the youth today and a lot of the world today is movies.” The question is, how adequate is the language of Hollywood films for what Mormons have to say?

Elder Boyd K. Packer, critical of how some LDS artists have too closely imitated the world, cautioned, “There are many who struggle and climb and finally reach the top of the ladder, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall.” Given the enormous investment of work and money required to produce films on par with Hollywood, and given the fact that the Hollywood style of film remains the ambition not just of some Church films but of most independent LDS filmmakers, it is worth evaluating the Hollywood style to see if Mormon filmmakers have their ladder leaning against the wrong wall. How adequate is this dominant style of film for Mormon beliefs and artistic expression? Given the religious importance of style, are there other options?

The Hollywood Movie

The classic Hollywood film that matured by the end of World War I and came to dominate global cinema by the 1940s has set the terms by which we recognize a movie to be a movie. Those terms are in part a set of expectations about where films are exhibited (commercial theaters and major TV and cable outlets) and their function within contemporary culture (as entertainment commodities). But a “Hollywood film” also consists
of a clearly definable set of artistic strategies for cinematic storytelling that have become conventional due to the very success and dominance of the American entertainment industry. These customs for constructing movie narratives, however, are not universal; they have simply evolved over time into the dominant mode of motion picture storytelling that we identify with Hollywood entertainment. Of course Hollywood films are not homogenous; a tremendous range of themes and artistic approaches are represented over the long and varied history of mainstream film. However, many identifiable artistic conventions remain consistent within Hollywood cinema that condition our general experience of the movies.

For example, we now expect films to focus on just a few central characters and the resolution of their problems. But the earliest narrative cinema had little complexity in characterization or any personalization of plot—think of the Keystone Cops or the swashbuckling of Douglas Fairbanks. In such early films, characters were subordinated to narrative action and were often little more than stereotypes. It was during the early decades of the twentieth century that narrative conventions began to formalize into what became the feature film. The artistic codification of film coincided with the evolution of motion pictures as an industry.

Practical production decisions and market forces affected the kinds of films that have become dominant and the style in which they are produced. One good example of this is the early move away from documentary toward fictional film. In the first decade of motion pictures (before about 1903), documentaries were more prominent than narrative films. But nonfiction films proved more difficult to make. Films that featured current events (“topicals”) or exotic places (“scenics”) were eagerly attended, but with such movies the filmmaker was subject to the erratic factors of weather, natural disaster or other spectacular events, and costly travel to locations. Such irregularity or cost did not fit the economics of the emerging entertainment industry. As film became established as a product in a market and movie studios became the factories producing this commodity, their owners required a scheduled, consistent output to fill demand. The answer to this problem was to bring all aspects of film production together in a controlled environment—the studio. The sound stages of a movie studio gave absolute control over time and place in ways the topicals and scenics could not, so it was natural within the emerging industry to move to fictional narratives whose locations could be controlled through sets and costumes. Professional actors could be directed to be whatever character was scripted, providing further control for the business-oriented studios. Fictional narratives are easier to make and sell as products, and
the success of the film industry cemented the fictional narrative as the cultural norm.  

The exhibition strategies for Hollywood films also developed according to what best fit the needs of commerce. Competition and advertising among early filmmakers influenced the traits that would become the expected norms of mainstream movies by what they emphasized. For example, early filmmakers boasted the realism of their creations as a major selling point. Because Hollywood films were becoming commodities, their producers sought commercial advantage by advertising appealing aspects of their films—such as a film’s historical authenticity. This had less to do with locations, the correct historical sequence of events, or authentic depictions of historical characters, and more to do with the apparent authenticity of interesting period sets and costumes. This visual appeal related to another major selling point for film—the very size and cost of their productions. The fact that a film required a “cast of thousands” or involved lavish expense to create the sets became a selling point, a part of the spectacle of the film that could draw crowds. Today, with the assistance of digital technologies and special effects, films can easily fabricate credible worlds of myth and fantasy, readily drawing viewers into such “realistic” presentations. These effects are so intricate and interesting in their own right that they have regularly become the subject of documentary films themselves and bring glamour and celebrity to the films they enhance. Another appeal to sell films has been movie stars. Because celebrity sells, filmmakers have not only cast famous people but created or enhanced their celebrity and then benefited from the box office draw of those celebrities. In Hollywood this has evolved the “star system,” in which films are “vehicles” for movie stars. This materially affects the look of a film, for it must then showcase the star, often glamorously. It also affects the way stories are made and told; characters are created to feature stars, and plots are constructed to keep attention on these personalities.

As movies have vied for prominence and played up these various appeals, they have become more and more expensive. Lavish sets, breathtaking cinematography, state-of-the-art special effects, and the look and appeal of celebrities are part of the dominant style, and as such are the expected norm. These expectations have proven a great barrier to the success of independent films or the development of minority cinemas precisely because of elevated “production values”—the money spent on spectacle. A Hollywood-style film can be prohibitively costly; however, if a film does not achieve or approximate mainstream production values, it may not even count, in Hollywood terms, as a film at all.
Eventually, an entire set of film practices would be built up around the effort to maximize the illusion of the fictional film world’s realism. These well-established conventions include *mise-en-scène* (the visual arrangement of sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting), framing (the camera’s point of view), continuity editing (a logical and visual seamlessness between shots), the shot/reverse shot (the set pattern for filming conversations, which gives the illusion that the viewer is a close participant, present among those talking), and respecting the “axis of action” (keeping the cameras on one side of an imaginary line so that viewers construct a consistent sense of physical space). By these techniques, what one sees on screen appears governed by spatial and temporal verisimilitude. Again, this did not have to be so. Theater, a related popular art form, has thrived in the absence of such verisimilitude. From these patterns emerged the formalized narrative model now labeled the “Institutional Mode of Representation” or IMR. The classic Hollywood-style film usually adheres to a familiar plot pattern in which crisis moves toward resolution in a logical, cause-and-effect manner. Most often, some event disrupts a preexisting equilibrium in the fictional world and the task of the story is to resolve the enigma by bringing it to a new equilibrium. This leads to another prominent requirement of standard Hollywood film—narrative closure. That is to say, the story should have a clear beginning, middle, and end in which nearly every question raised is answered. And unlike the earliest films that placed action above character, the Hollywood style insists upon protagonists who are psychologically well-rounded characters that sustain our attention and whose actions bring about the necessary narrative resolution. Psychological verisimilitude is required for the principal characters in the story and for the audience members who are invited to identify with the characters’ situations.

The classical Hollywood narrative has been termed “an excessively obvious cinema.” To maximize appeal to as many people as possible, a lowest-common-denominator approach is taken with the narrative. Every element of the film contributes directly to developing and resolving the familiar complication-resolution story pattern within the standard 90 to 120 minutes. Editing, for example, is to be invisible, seamlessly relating one shot or scene to another in the most direct and logical manner (continuity editing). “The film should be comprehensible and unambiguous.” Hollywood films are easy to understand both logically and emotionally because every component of the film—story, actors, sets, editing, music—together contributes to following the main character’s journey toward crisis and resolution; viewers are guided every step of the way.
In summary, the classical Hollywood style of film consists of a fictional narrative of high spatial and temporal verisimilitude (usually requiring high production values) whose various artistic elements are unified around advancing a central character’s story from crisis to resolution in an emotionally engaging and unambiguous way. Once we understand the Hollywood style as a style—as a set of choices and not as an inherent requirement of the medium—then alternatives become available. Any characteristics of Hollywood film may or may not be appropriate for religious filmmaking generally or for Mormon cinema as it evolves. What will be apparent from a closer look at Legacy will be how the Hollywood style has been adopted in many ways as a part of institutional LDS filmmaking, and what this might portend for emerging Mormon cinema.

**Legacy and Classical Hollywood Style**

*Legacy* recounts the story of early Mormonism and the westward migration of the Mormon people. This is done through a frame story (a story nesting another story within it) that begins at the film’s historical endpoint—Salt Lake City in 1893, at the occasion of the Salt Lake Temple’s dedication. An old woman, the “elderly” Eliza, is relating to her grandson her “legacy of faith.” Her story frames the Mormon narrative in its historical and spiritual contexts. After her introduction as an older woman reflecting back in time, the action flashes back to the 1830s to Eliza as a young girl and follows her personal story forward in time as her family converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, joins its westward migration, and shares its persecutions and trials. Most of the film’s screen time is spent in the Nauvoo period where the Nauvoo Temple is under construction. Eliza sees the temple rise and finds happiness in marrying a young English convert, David. But the Prophet Joseph is assassinated and the Saints are driven out, this time to the valley of the Great Salt Lake. The film ends in Utah with the elderly Eliza’s challenge to her grandson to hold on to the legacy of faith that has been passed down to him—and by implication, to the film’s viewers.

As suggested above, *Legacy* represents the Church’s most successful effort to that point at imitating Hollywood-style films and, more specifically, the genre of traditional religious film. Its overall presentational form, structure, and stylistics are patterned after bigger-than-life Hollywood features like *The Ten Commandments* (1956) or *Ben Hur* (1959). Like those films, *Legacy* suggests the importance of its subject by its scope—across time, narratively, as it covers various periods of Church history; across space, visually, with wide shots of vistas suggesting the magnitude of the
Mormon migration; and through its theatrical presentation on 65mm film in an IMAX-like theater with surround sound. The visual style is richly abundant, with period costumes and sets interesting for their historical accuracy. Whether it is the story locations of Independence, Haun's Mill, or Nauvoo, the scenes are large, authentic, and carefully art directed. Indeed, the scale of the film’s presentational form puts the art direction in control of almost all aspects of the film’s stylistic approach. The 65mm form and the visual backdrop for the action overpower all other elements, except perhaps sound.

In its use of sound, especially the music score, *Legacy* clearly follows the Hollywood model. A symphonic score is used for each scene and sequence, including a selection of Mormon hymns sung by the Tabernacle Choir, as well as classically rendered pieces. As in films from Hollywood’s classical era, music is used “wall-to-wall,” providing an emotionally rich experience. *Legacy* exemplifies cinematic sensuousness at its height.

The film is impressive as spectacle, and like the best of Hollywood films, it fully immerses the viewer into its projected world. Unlike other religious epics, however, *Legacy* does not bring to the forefront a dominant religious figure such as Moses. *Legacy* is obviously not the Church’s counterpart to Zanuck’s 1940 *Brigham Young*, nor is it the life story of Joseph Smith—though both men appear in the film. Instead, it is the fictional Everywoman, Eliza Morley, who demands our attention and who provides the framework for recounting the Mormon experience. Following a single protagonist and identifying with her psychologically is conventional for classical filmmaking, and *Legacy* adheres to this (at least initially), as well as to other standard elements of Hollywood films that together give viewers ample means to be drawn into its imaginative world.

And yet in important ways *Legacy* also departs from the Hollywood style. This starts with its treatment of the main character. Within the Hollywood style, attention is constantly directed to the central protagonist, and the plot follows his or her actions and their consequences. Film techniques in *Legacy* seem to confirm this role for Eliza. The story-within-a-story framing device places the older Eliza authoritatively at both ends of the narrative. In young Eliza’s opening scene in the barn and later in the house as she first meets Joseph Smith, lighting is controlled for dramatic effect. Shafts of light and careful backlighting present Eliza in a hallowed setting with the young Mormon prophet. These devices and her priority in the overall film clearly establish her as the central character. She is even part of a romantic love triangle—another strong indication that we are to pay attention to her fate. Yet, contrary to Hollywood custom, *Legacy*’s central protagonist actually drifts in and out of the narrative.
The film’s emotional focus does not stay on Eliza, her crises, and their resolution. Obvious opportunities to heighten the personal drama of her life are repeatedly passed by. For example, as Eliza is courted by two men, the three of them never appear in the same scene together. The romantic scenes are very short, almost implied. In fact, Jacob, the older suitor, never gets an opportunity to voice his affections to Eliza on screen. At another point, when Eliza suffers from cholera and is blessed by Jacob and Joseph Smith, the two men arrive and with little dramatic setup place their hands on her head, and she is healed. The entire sequence is shot from a wide angle with only two quick reaction shots from bystanders. Little care is taken to construct a seamless visual progression of images that build the realistic dramatic moment. Even though this scene has the potential (in a classic Hollywood presentation) of becoming highly charged, it is never framed or edited to take advantage of the moment (as are the dramatically constructed blessings scenes from God’s Army [2000] and The Other Side of Heaven [2001]). By the time Legacy enters its final third, young Eliza has all but disappeared from the story line. If she were not the voice-over narrator, she would essentially disappear before the film’s conclusion.

Another difference from standard Hollywood storytelling is Legacy’s lack of a strong sense of narrative closure. The film does have a formal ending (through the return of the elder Eliza and her exhortation to the next generation), but it lacks closure in the conventional sense because at this point viewers are no longer identifying as much with Eliza and because the overall structure does not point toward a clear resolution. Rather, we are offered an alternative structure that is more cyclical, a repeating pattern: the problem of whether the Saints will ever find a place to worship in peace. That question is asked and answered through a rise-and-fall episodic structure with no definitive ending to the pattern. As with Eliza’s life, for the Mormons nothing ever resolves itself conclusively. Even though they eventually arrive at the Great Salt Lake Valley, there is no classic denouement, no clear-cut conclusion beyond the fact that they have reached their geographical destination. This atypical treatment of character and plot may not fit the Hollywood style, but it is consistent with some elements of an alternative cinematic style identified by Paul Schrader, explained below.

Another deviation from Hollywood filmmaking is the way Legacy does not rely upon continuity editing. In traditional narrative film, a character looks across a room, for example, and the shot that follows is a view of the object this person is looking at. This is logical, and in mainstream films we have come to expect the way this simple technique suggests spatial and psychological continuity from shot to shot and scene to scene. Rather than
using this “invisible” method to connect scenes, *Legacy* relies heavily on Eliza’s voice-over narration to link the progression of episodes. Continuity editing is minimal when compared to classic Hollywood structure. There are very few editing effects other than the standard alternation of master and close-up shots. But even then, scenes are presented as though two-dimensional at times—stylized, even, as in a tableau. The actors work in groups of two or three, facing the camera in framing that appears almost more theatrical than natural. In this respect, *Legacy* is inconsistent with the classic Hollywood style that attempts to use composition and editing to enhance verisimilitude. These various departures from traditional cinematic techniques may have come about more through production constraints than through design, but in any case they undercut the film’s efforts at realism. Doing so, however, may in fact prove one of the film’s merits, rather than faults, at least if *Legacy* is measured by one important alternative aesthetic model for religious film.

**Paul Schrader’s Transcendental Style**

Screenwriter and director Paul Schrader criticized the Hollywood approach to religion in his early 1972 study, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Although he ended up joining the very industry he criticized—his credits include collaborations with Martin Scorsese on Hollywood successes like *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980)—his films have nevertheless retained strongly religious aspects. Described as “religious pilgrimages,” his films involve a specific sort of “redemptive motif” consistent with principal components of his theoretical work. Schrader’s study affirms film to be a vital medium for spiritual experience, but he claims that the Hollywood style actually impedes such experience. He sets forth an alternative film aesthetic which he has identified in the works of certain international directors—Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Dreyer. Schrader found in these directors’ works a cinematic style that specifically addresses the spiritual, that “reach[es] toward the other-worldly.” Examining films such as Ozu’s *Tokyo Story* (1953), Bresson’s *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), and Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), Schrader observed what he termed a “transcendental style.” This consisted of a set of distinct structural and formal traits that together create a singular spiritual effect. Though problematic in many ways, Schrader’s transcendental style offers a well-developed and spiritually oriented approach by which to analyze *Legacy* from a contrasting perspective.
Schrader starts from a different position than most in considering religion and film; he contends that the stylistic techniques of filmmaking have more to do with a film’s religious nature than does the actual subject matter. With French filmmaker Robert Bresson, he believes “the subject of a film is only a pretext. Form much more than content touches a viewer and elevates him.” Spirituality elevation through the aesthetics of cinematic form is not easy, however, precisely because of the sensuous realism of film. It is Schrader’s contention, referring to the thinking of French neorealist André Bazin, that “the spiritual quality in art suffered its decline at the expense of ‘realism.’” The cinematic medium, grounded in the material world of sensuous imagery, insists on a reality that is vividly present for the viewer. In contrast, traditional art forms have been able to distort or reshape the realistic image in order to give the impression of seeing beyond physical reality to a deeper, spiritual (more “truthful”) reality. The immediacy of the film image, its ability to reproduce reality, “canonized the human, sensual and profane: it celebrated the realistic.” Consequently, traditional mainstream films do not urge viewers on toward a deeper truth beyond the surface reality or toward any sort of spiritual communion or transcendence. By giving viewers more physical reality, films give viewers less spiritual reality.

This is true, claims Schrader, even of those films that are openly religious or faith-affirming. Schrader is especially critical of “sex-and-sand” religious spectacles epitomized by the work of Cecil B. DeMille. These fail in their spiritual potential not because of their treatment of biblical history but due to their form. As is typical in Hollywood entertainment, such films rely on an abundance of visual, narrative, and musical methods. Such qualities give these movies their immediacy, to be sure, but according to Schrader, doing so fundamentally misaligns spirituality with cinematic reality. The spiritual logic in DeMille’s films, according to Schrader, is flawed, because for DeMille, “the film is ‘real,’ the spiritual is ‘on’ film, ergo: the spiritual is real.” In other words, through its familiar methods, Hollywood provides viewers a vivid sense of reality; indeed, the whole idea is that one gets caught up in the film’s realistic presentation. But being caught up in the film is a different thing than actually communing with the divine or connecting to a deeper, transcendent reality. Something like the divine finger of fire carving the Ten Commandments out of solid rock may be religiously interesting and reaffirming to one’s convictions, but it is not an encounter with the divine, and achieving such encounters is a more genuine religious purpose or function for film than simply the positive portrayal of beliefs or religious history. Schrader instead asks how film can create “hierophanies”—spiritual or otherworldly manifestations that erupt
within earthly time and space. His focus is phenomenological—oriented to the personal, even mystical, experience of the viewer. This means the craft of religious film, as he sees it, should not be geared toward presenting re-creations of events from religious history, but to moving the viewer through a spiritual process culminating in an actual encounter with the divine—transcendence.

Using his favorite directors as models, Schrader claims there is a discernible method for effecting that transcendence. His study isolates specific stylistic elements and structural devices expressive of the transcendent. No matter the cultural or religious setting, he claims, there exist certain cinematic methods, “precise temporal means—camera angles, dialogue, editing—for predetermined transcendental ends.” All of the techniques of the transcendental style work to get beyond the immediacy of film’s sensuous image and the realism and emotional involvement emphasized in the established Hollywood style. The dramatic events that pass for real life in traditional Hollywood films are sustained by “emotional constructs—plot, acting, camerawork, editing, music.” In the transcendental style, however, every stylistic tool is used not to create a realistic experience but to postpone emotional involvement and undercut verisimilitude.

This denial of the immediate satisfactions of conventional film methods is critical to preparing for a transcendent experience. Otherwise, viewers will be emotionally satisfied by the immediate sensuous experience of the film and will not be ready for transcendence. To avoid this, the transcendental style begins with reworking traditional narrative elements. The classical plotline of a beginning, middle, and end is rejected and replaced by a cyclical structure, a “rhythmic” pacing of “ritual.” The acting is modified into “relatively simple, demonstrable characteristics,” and psychological interest in characters is downplayed. Otherwise, if viewers identified closely with characters, the emotional dynamics of the film would be tied to the characters’ fates, immersing the viewer in psychological realism at the expense of a transcendent reality. Since Schrader’s theory calls for no dramatic structure or three-dimensional characters, editing is governed by “regular, unostentatious cuts” in which each shot, each event, “[leads] only to the next.” No attempt is made to edit for impact or for juxtaposing angles or scenes. All sound is eliminated except for natural ambience, reinforcing a concern for the “minutiae of life,” “the cold reality,” and music is used sparingly.
Schrader’s Three-Part Movement

These stylistic elements support a three-part narrative structure that Schrader identifies as the central dynamic of the transcendental style. As the various stylistic tools strip away the immediacy and the sensuous nature of the cinematic image, viewers begin the process of preparing for a spiritual experience by “moving through” the realism of the motion picture they are viewing to something deeper. Schrader identifies three parts to this process, which he labels “the everyday,” “disparity,” and “stasis.”

1. The Everyday. By the “everyday,” Schrader refers to the way certain filmmakers have initiated the process of transcendence through the “meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living.”30 The “everyday” cuts against film’s sensuousness and “annuls the viewer’s natural desire to participate vicariously in the action on screen.”31 This may seem counterintuitive, but it prepares the viewer for what is to come by “preventing him from seeing [life] as he is accustomed”32 and undercutting the image’s power to distract us by its presentation of sensuous reality. For the viewer to capture a glimpse of the ineffable, the filmmaker must reject all “conventional interpretations of reality.”33 The viewer is thus better prepared to “face the Unknown.”34 All of this is “a prelude to the moment of redemption”; that is, to that moment when the viewer can transcend the film’s surface reality to a higher expression of the “Wholly Other.”35 The viewers undergo a kind of sanctification and preparation that can happen only as the filmmaker denies them opportunities to succumb to the pleasures that would otherwise keep them anchored to the film’s engaging but limited reality.

2. Disparity. As images of the “everyday” compound, viewers sense that “there are deep, untapped feelings just below the surface” of the film’s realistic presentation.36 This Schrader labels as “disparity.” Disparity is “the paradox of the spiritual existing within the physical,” a spiritual reality that is attempting to rupture out into physical reality.37 It is experienced as a growing sense of expectation. Such an attitude would not occur if the sumptuousness of traditional Hollywood cinema were present to satisfy the hungers it creates. For the audience to “see” the deeper or transcendent reality, the filmmaker must pound away at the immediacy of the sensuous cinematic reality. Rather than inviting viewers to enjoy the pleasures of film’s reality, the filmmaker attempts to negate those very pleasures, robbing them of their immediacy through careful repetition of the “everyday.” This is not the same as desensitization, through which viewers become numb through overstimulation. The transcendental style’s subtle repetitions do not deaden response, but refocus the viewers’ desire for resolution.
by leading them into an “emotionally irresolvable dilemma” that requires a carefully constructed emotional release, or a moment of “stasis.”

3. Stasis. “Stasis” provides Schrader’s emotional, transcendental climax, the calculated moment of transcendence made possible because of the compounding of the “everyday” that creates anxiety and expectation. “Stasis” is not the climax in the traditional sense of a narrative arc; it is not narratively logical, nor is it psychologically associated with resolving action. Rather, the final phase of the transcendental style “serves to freeze the emotional into expression, the disparity into stasis.” Another way of understanding this mysterious destination point is that “stasis” names the moment of transcendence, a summoning (or relieving) of emotion in response to a triggering technique which can “transport us into a region that is no longer simply terrestrial, but rather cosmic.” This is triggered by the use of a static shot, “a blast of music,” or “an overt symbol.” An illustration is when Ozu cuts away from the interior setting of a family drama at the height of “disparity” to a static, tranquil shot of nature; or when Bresson holds on an image of a smoldering cross in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. Stasis freezes the empathy that has been created within the viewer, “transform[ing] empathy into aesthetic appreciation, experience into expression, emotion into form,” and thereby expressing something deeper than itself: the inner unity of all things. Disparity is not resolved, but transcended.

Obviously this final stage is not easy to explain; the otherworldly is always difficult to convey with worldly terms. For Schrader, conventional cinema presents an obvious imaginative world that is readily entered and fully rational. Spirituality is not about depicting religious events or being lost in a work of art, but being found in communion with the divine. The only avenue to the otherworldly is through denial of the rich world of images and sounds that movies so amply provide. Schrader’s three-part movement and the cinematic tools for effecting it may be hard to grasp or to accept, but this may be due to viewers’ never having been exposed to films like Ozu’s, Bresson’s, or Dreyer’s, where moments of transcendence follow the dynamic Schrader describes. This begs the question as to whether the transcendental style is only an art film phenomenon. But Schrader at least demonstrates how some stylistic devices have been employed to provide alternative models to the standard Hollywood approach.

One critic describes Schrader’s own films in terms of the transcendental style (without naming it as such): “In films directed by Schrader, a redemptive motif is usually driven to a single moment of resolution captured in a frozen last image, a symbolic stylistic gesture that Schrader borrowed from Bresson.” This “stasis” moment is evident in Scorsese’s *The
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Last Temptation of Christ (1988), written by Schrader. In a long fictional fantasy sequence, Christ (hanging on the cross) is offered the opportunity not to die but to live an everyday life. At the moment when he rejects this temptation, the fantasy breaks suddenly and Christ is seen again on the cross in a frozen image of his joy. At the moment when he accepts his own redemptive mission, he completes it. This moment comes abruptly, accompanied by flashes of color and bells ringing, and is followed almost immediately by the closing credits. Though the film generally plays to the sensuousness of Hollywood film, its narrative climax (which Schrader adapted from the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis) clearly displays the influence of the transcendental style. Though the transcendental style is an attempt at reversing the traditional Hollywood model, Schrader’s own work demonstrates that this religious aesthetic is not completely incompatible with mainstream film.

Latter-day Saints and the Transcendental Style

Could there be a similarity between Schrader’s transcendental style and the filmic style exhibited in LDS movies? Are techniques similar to what Schrader describes at work in LDS films such as Legacy? Although Latter-day Saints would certainly be sympathetic to any serious attempt to seek or create spiritual experience through the medium of film, Schrader’s approach presents several difficulties. First of all, Mormons, like so many other casual filmgoers, have been conditioned to expect and enjoy the many conventional cinematic elements that mainstream film has accustomed them to—a linear plot, psychological identification with leading characters, and enjoyment of the visual and auditory splendor of the movie medium, among others. To downplay emotional appeals (or the music that so often cues emotion in the viewer) would seem to many Latter-day Saints to work against achieving a realistic presentation of spiritual moments on screen. This is especially true since Church films have relied heavily upon Hollywood’s emotional techniques, such as mood music, to signal spiritual messages.

A second problem is that Latter-day Saints do not really have a concept of “transcendence” within their theology. They believe that a few select individuals have been “translated” to a higher physical or spiritual form, but LDS theology does not use the term “transcendence” to refer to personal religious experience. Schrader’s “transcendence” identifies a process leading to a singular and abrupt change in one’s spiritual being, an encounter with God. Mormon encounters with deity do not rule out visions and personal visitations of heavenly beings, but encounters with
God are typically instances in which one feels his presence through the Holy Ghost. This can occur in any context but is considered very personal. Latter-day Saints do not understand spirituality as something orchestrated through artistic techniques or mapped to a psychological process like the three movements Schrader describes. Still, they can sympathize strongly with Schrader’s intense focus upon the spiritual state of movie viewers as they look at the religious phenomenology of film, and LDS resistance to Hollywood worldliness could make Mormons sympathetic to arguments against accepting Hollywood’s style uncritically.

A more significant problem for Latter-day Saints in accepting the transcendental style of film is the fact that Schrader’s approach rests upon a theology that perceives spiritual reality as immaterial and “other,” with little connection to physical reality or experience. This is fundamentally at odds with LDS belief about the physical nature of God and the spiritual nature of physical matter. Schrader’s argument concerning the sensuousness of the cinematic medium seems reasonable—that the moving image holds us too close to the physical nature of reality—but this will likely fail to convince Latter-day Saints that the final objective of a transcendent experience is an intangible expression of an ineffable divinity. LDS theology holds that the transcendent, God, is an embodied reality. This translates into a deep appreciation of materiality. For Mormons, the sensuous cinematic image, like the sensuous world, might actually embody the divine, not prove an obstacle to it. Thus, an aesthetic that systematically works against the realism of film may not be suited to Mormon belief.

There is ample reason for the typically pragmatic Latter-day Saints to value the “everyday,” but what of “disparity”? Certainly they have a keen sense of the duality of existence as they contrast the mundane with the spiritual. But within Schrader’s three-part movement, “disparity” elicits the spiritual through an anxious dissatisfaction with the present—an echo of the Protestant emphasis on a fallen world. This is something less consonant with Mormon optimism about this life. As for “stasis,” it may be that Schrader’s concept is too tied to an immaterial and distant deity to make sense to a Latter-day Saint.

Still, as a serious attempt to find a spiritual approach to film and as an alternative to the Hollywood style, Schrader’s transcendental style deserves a closer look.

The Transcendental and Hollywood Styles in Legacy

As mentioned above, Legacy shares in but also makes critical departures from classical Hollywood style. Since Schrader’s transcendental
style is almost a complete negation of Hollywood’s artistic approach, it is possible that where *Legacy* departs from the Hollywood style it may come close to Schrader’s paradigm. For example, Schrader’s rejection of the classical plotline, replacing it with a cyclical structure, is very similar to the episodic structure of *Legacy*. The episodic rise and fall of the Mormon westward movement with its lack of definitive resolution is very similar to Schrader’s description of the cyclical structure of the transcendent style. The repeated trials of the Latter-day Saints can be seen as this “rhythmic” pacing of “ritual.”44 In addition, because *Legacy*’s characters are largely two-dimensional (and the protagonist becomes less well-rounded over time), this fits Schrader’s insistence on a minimal acting style downplaying psychological interest in characters.45 The static camera shots in *Legacy* effectively avoid leading the viewers’ point of view, undercutting connection with a realistic, three-dimensional world. In place of continuity editing, Schrader insists on “regular, unostentatious cuts” in which each event “[leads] only to the next.”46 While *Legacy* does make some edits for effect, it resists many opportunities to edit for continuity.

With respect to sound and music, however, *Legacy* counters the transcendent style and clearly aligns itself with conventional Hollywood film. The rich sound effects go well beyond the use of ambient sound and give little chance to build up the realism of life’s “cold reality.”47 And the wall-to-wall symphonic score most certainly does not establish a moment for a distinctive “blast of music” to punctuate decisive moments, as Schrader wishes. *Legacy*’s music is far too ubiquitous and clearly emblematic of Hollywood traditions.

Further aligning itself with conventional film, *Legacy*’s rich visual style is diametrically opposed to the transcendent style. *Legacy* reinforces the realistic presentation, rather than reducing it, with its saturated colors and large format. Still, although the sensuousness of the 65mm image is overwhelming, there is a static quality in its images. The world of *Legacy* is a compelling spectacle, but it is more iconic than three-dimensional. The lasting impression is of a tableau—a line of wagons filing across the plains, or it is the image of the Nauvoo Temple white against a gray sky, a static symbol of Mormon achievement. Viewers experience a succession of such images, each grandly pictorial. As such, these images function less dramatically and more symbolically. While they are grand and realistic, these images do not draw us into this imaginative world; they leave us with a lingering, cumulative impression of the Latter-day Saints’ sojourn and suffering. To the extent that the images of *Legacy* are iconic, rather than dynamic, they are more in keeping with the two-dimensional, stylized representations found in medieval art. Ironically, images made grand
enough actually may become less realistic and more mythic in nature, and this seems much in keeping with Schrader’s theory.

Apart from its 65mm format and exuberant treatment of sound and music, it appears that Legacy does apply several particulars of Schrader’s transcendental style, though perhaps unknowingly and perhaps not for the same purpose or effect. The “everyday” as Schrader found it in Bresson’s films is of a different character than anything in Legacy, and yet within Legacy’s rising and falling episodic structure there is something that approximates the same effect. Over and over again, the Saints are forced from one settlement to the next. Rather than reinforcing a dramatic narrative structure with its inciting event and rising action that reaches a climax and resolves through denouement, the structure of Legacy rises and falls, rises and falls across a series of historical events. Whether or not this results in “disparity,” with its discomfiting experience of anxiety and expectation within the viewer, depends on one’s personal response to Legacy. It may be that the musical score and rich visual style are satisfying enough that the viewer never experiences the sense that something is lying behind or beyond the sensuous experience of the movie, as Schrader’s theory requires. This is difficult to gauge, given its subjectivity, but there is evidence of “stasis” within Legacy.

Toward the film’s conclusion, Legacy’s structure shifts completely away from any sense of a Hollywood narrative. Realistic characters now function as types; specific historical events no longer control the film’s

Wide, sweeping shots of the Saints coming across the plains can be interpreted as an attempt to give the film an epic, Hollywood-style flourish. But something else may be at work: Legacy’s collective protagonist reflects Latter-day Saint belief that the greatest work is accomplished not by individuals but by a multigenerational body of Saints. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
structure. The film’s realistic timeline shifts into a timeless montage of wagon train images. All the scenes are shot in wide angle, but a rhythm builds climactically through music and editing. This could be considered the film’s high point—and its transcendent moment—but it does not play out according to Schrader’s formula. While the film is grounded on an episodic structure, the narrative is not resolved, nor is there a singular “burst of music” signaling an eruption of the divine into the mundane. Eliza is there to deliver her final words about passing on a legacy, but this is done quietly. The story is not about her, nor is she there to effect a transcendent moment. The lasting image from the film, the legacy of Legacy, is that static tableau, the iconic mural, as it were, of the Saints in caravan crossing the plains. Rather than revealing the divine on screen or symbolically through aural eruption, the story and the style point to a future encounter with the divine.

The sensuous and emotional emphasis of Legacy makes it more consonant with the Hollywood than the transcendental style of film, but in some ways it deviates from both. Legacy’s mixing of stylistic elements might even be considered more aligned with a documentary approach than with traditional narrative. Although no specific documentary elements connect the fictional aspects of the film to actual historical events (such as historical photographs or diary excerpts), it is clear that the film’s final result is not just a realistic drama but a presentational testament to the realities that tested and shaped the Mormon experience and doctrine. But Legacy lacks the detachment of documentary, just as it lacks the full engagement of Eliza’s story that a Hollywood approach would require. Eliza actually functions more like the narrator of a documentary film than as the protagonist of this historical drama. Legacy is in fact docudrama, with Eliza’s narration serving as our guide and the authorized voice of the Church.

LDS Departures from Both Styles

The Hollywood and transcendental styles, despite being defined in opposition to one another, share certain presuppositions about crafting the experiences of viewers. Whatever its complexities, the transcendental style boils down to the presupposition that a film’s style can effect transcendence. Latter-day Saints, as many other people of faith, would resist the notion that spirituality can be scripted. And yet, this is precisely the religious problem at the root of the Hollywood style, as well. Its various means (especially the immediacy of its imagery and musical score) are calculated to effect an emotional state. When brought to such a state, is this a spiritual moment, or are viewers simply responding to the emotional cues to which they have been accustomed? This is particularly problematic
with Church films, whose implicit purpose is spiritual but whose explicit form relies on heavy emotional cuing.

In a general conference address, Elder Richard G. Scott taught Church members to distinguish carefully between emotion and the Spirit. He stated that spiritual impressions are often “accompanied by powerful emotions that make it difficult to speak and bring tears to the eyes.” But he cautioned, “A testimony is not emotion. It is the very essence of character woven from threads born of countless correct decisions.” He correlates spiritual assurance with moral actions, not with passive acceptance of emotionally influential works of art or entertainment. While not trying to oversimplify the very complex issue of personal response to film, it would still seem inconsistent for a Mormon aesthetic to include the manipulation of emotions or to do anything to cause people to confuse emotions with genuine spiritual promptings.

Emotional manipulation, or at least the potential to confuse spiritual and emotional experience, are obvious concerns with Legacy (as well as similar Church films) because of the sensational emotional appeal of its visual and auditory grandeur. Moreover, the inclusion of a romantic love triangle would seem to further confuse spiritual and emotional responses to the film, since the screen romance (with its conventional emotional dynamic) is woven seamlessly into the larger religious narrative. Viewers’ emotional engagement in David’s joining the Church and his joining Eliza in marriage are continuous with each other, if not indistinguishable, which is problematic. However, these emotional complexities are minimized to the extent that Eliza herself is. Just as she is not truly an objective observer in a documentary, she is not a true leading lady in a typical screen romance. Her presence is not compelling, so neither is our investment in the story of her two suitors.

If there is a possibility of emotional manipulation in Legacy, it is not found in Eliza’s character or personal story. In Legacy, viewers can actually forget that its main character is the protagonist—something impossible within traditional cinema. If anything, the emotional appeal of Legacy pertains to the depiction of the community of Mormons striving together. Eliza’s life is not important to focus on, finally, because in the end her life has become subordinate to the larger movement of the Latter-day Saints. She merely provides us a glimpse of what it means to be part of a larger religious community’s “legacy of faith.” Like the stories of other Latter-day Saints, her personal story is swallowed up in the grander enterprise of the kingdom of God, and the cinematic grandeur of Legacy correlates to this less personal, more communal, emphasis. Perhaps the group-as-protagonist signals Legacy’s innovation of a specifically Mormon film aesthetic.
The Body of Christ as the Basis of a Distinctive Mormon Aesthetic

Legacy includes many recognizable elements of the Hollywood production style, yet its narrative focus on the group, rather than the individual, overturns a central tenet of mainstream film. Similarly, Legacy includes many identifiable elements of the transcendental style, yet its narrative structure also violates the three-part process Schrader outlines for the transcendental style; the film never climaxes in a singular moment of emotional release (stasis). Legacy also borrows somewhat from documentary style, with Eliza providing narrative coherence across a series of episodes through her voice-over; yet Eliza is neither an objective authority nor a historical figure. As the film ultimately subordinates her story to that of the Mormons generally, Eliza’s character serves to reinforce a style and structure oriented to the communal. Rather than being an exception to other aesthetic models, this becomes the grounds for a specifically Mormon approach to film.

The centrality of the group and its striving toward the social and religious ideal of Zion is thematically grounded in the story of ancient Israel and can be found broadly in Jewish and Christian art and literature. A literary example from Mormonism is Maurine Whipple’s The Giant Joshua—considered by many to be the greatest Mormon novel to date—which portrays Mormon pioneers traveling to and establishing their society in southern Utah. But cinematic correlates to a group aesthetic are more difficult to find, given the dominance of the Hollywood narrative form and the primacy of the individual protagonist within that tradition. Religious films like DeMille’s Ten Commandments, though based on the story of Israelites in the Bible, tend to celebrate the individual rather than the group. Moses-as-prophet becomes Moses-as-hero within a fairly traditional role as a protagonist whose fate takes precedence over the group he leads and represents.

Some politically oriented documentaries have emphasized group identity and ambition, such as the newsreels popular in World War II. Leni Riefenstahl’s famous propaganda film documenting the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens, 1935), depicts Germans as a united, powerful group marching toward an ideal civilization. From Soviet cinema, Dziga Vertov’s documentary film, One Sixth of the World (Shestaya Chast Mira, 1926), depicts and catalogues the disparate peoples of the Soviet Union, promoting social cohesion across the broadly dispersed peoples of that nation. The highly biased nature of these political documentaries reminds us that group-oriented films can be propagandistic, especially those sponsored by an institution (political,
religious, or corporate) desiring to shape public opinion. *Legacy* could be read as propaganda;\textsuperscript{50} it certainly attempts to frame public understanding of Mormon history. However, it lacks the present and pressing social purpose of propaganda films. There is no call to action, not even an overt missionary invitation. *Legacy* seems intent not on selling the religion but on documenting its character. And that character is unmistakably community oriented and religiously committed.

The collective protagonist of *Legacy* reflects a central Christian ideal, the body of Christ, which has long been compared to the Church and its members: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). No one generation—and clearly no individual figure or character—assumes more importance than the next. *Legacy’s* collective character communicates that the real work of the kingdom is accomplished less individually than communally. Despite the fact that individuals in Church history, such as prophets, are revered and even idealized, it is the collective body of believing Saints that accomplishes the work and moves the Church forward. The collective body of Christ extends even beyond the specific historical group depicted, incorporating and binding one generation to the next in their united search for Zion.

A sequence toward the end of *Legacy* illustrates the potency of this group aesthetic. The setting is gloomy. It is raining. As the wagons weave through tangled trees, the Morley family wagon slides off the trail, tumbles into the river, and capsizes. The horses thrash about desperately. Other characters rush in to help the distressed. This is perhaps the most moving scene in the film. The wagon falling was in fact an unscripted accident, yet the actors stay in character and the event becomes strongly representative of actual pioneer hardships. It is shot with a master shot and a couple of medium shots of the Morley family collecting themselves on the river bank, then gathering their belongings and trudging on westward. The scene’s actuality draws the viewers emotionally into it. Viewers sense that the scene is “real,” and, as the images wash over them, they hear, “Come, Come Ye Saints” underneath. This is not hierophany, a revelation in blinding light; this is not a highly charged dramatic Hollywood resolution, nor is it Schrader’s stasis, but a simple and profound illumination of devotion, a devotion that reminds viewers of the divine, as seen through the conviction and witness of others; and it is found in the witness of the many, not the one. The divine is seen in the Saints’ undaunted onward movement as a body of suffering but determined believers.

Such an aesthetic has consequences beyond simply the depiction of group protagonists or the cinematic representation of the Mormon com-
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Covenants, shared suffering, and a cooperative spirit bind Latter-day Saints across places and time periods, unifying them, as in the Pauline “body of Christ” imagery, and also making possible the creation of Zion—and of enterprises contributing to that ideal civilization, including the arts. Invoking the Mormon communal ideal while urging Church youth toward literary accomplishment, Orson Whitney claimed that Zion would be “as famed for intelligence and culture as for purity, truth and beauty.”

“[Joseph Smith] knew that his people must progress, that their destiny demanded it; that culture is the duty of man, as intelligence is the glory of God.” Because of the popular nature and the collaboration required in creating film, it could be that this medium is even more appropriate than literature as an artistic, spiritual, and unifying means contributing to the creation of Mormon Zionistic community.

While filmmaking is always a collaborative enterprise, individual actors or directors often gain celebrity or become the driving interest in or force behind movies. In film, an auteur is a director who puts his or her creative stamp upon a body of work, using a sequence of films to work out his or her special vision of the world. Like a featured movie star, the auteur is the featured creator. The arts have long idealized the individual genius.
of authors, painters, actors, and even filmmakers. An aesthetic based in the body of Christ would resist temptations to individual celebrity. One could make a case that Church films like *Legacy* are more authentic than independent Mormon movies—not just because of their official sponsorship and oversight of story-line elements, but because they are created by a largely uncredited group of Latter-day Saints.53

This claim may be idealistic, as the Church has paid its filmmakers and often used nonmember cast and crew, yet films such as *Legacy* demonstrate how individuals (whether characters in the drama or members of the film crew) are engulfed by the larger purpose of the Church. Star-driven narratives do not effectively communicate the Church’s purposes for film, which include an active looking to its past to faithfully energize its future purpose and ongoing story. Eliza’s lapse from the central focus of *Legacy* makes the best sense if a dramatic structure is avoided where the protagonist’s goals or struggles take precedence over the Church’s collective and ongoing forward movement.

That movement is bodied forth visually in *Legacy* by the migration scenes. Perhaps, instead of Schrader’s concept of the “everyday,” the episodic rise-and-fall pattern of the Mormons’ communal westward movement signals the communal and eternally progressive identity of the Latter-day Saints. The wagon train montage sequences suggest that all of this cannot end with one individual’s story. If there were some significant climax and resolution, as in the Hollywood style, the spiritual legacy would conclude. But that is not how *Legacy* ends, if it ends at all. It communicates that the legacy of the Saints must carry on until their spiritual covenant with Christ is fulfilled. *Legacy* shows that collective historical events take precedence over character-driven stories.

The building of the Nauvoo Temple also functions as a visual anchoring point in *Legacy* as much as the westbound wagon trains, and its centrality to the film is parallel to the centrality of temples in LDS belief. These are the sites of transcendence for Latter-day Saints, but they are also figurative altars of sacrifice. As the Nauvoo Temple and then the Salt Lake Temple exemplify in *Legacy*, the Saints find purpose, identity, and social bonding through their communal efforts to build and then worship in their temples. Rather than understanding the temple scenes as mere historical backdrops, *Legacy* suggests that temple building and community building are identical enterprises. This, too, has an aesthetic correlative to cinema.

A film is called into being by a cooperative effort, Erwin Panofsky points out, and is therefore “the nearest modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral.”54 The roles of film personnel correspond, more or less, to those overseeing and accomplishing the erection of a cathedral—bishop, archi-
tect, and so forth, down to the lowliest mason working on the cathedral. “And if you speak to any one of these collaborators he will tell you, with perfect bona fides, that his is really the most important job—which is quite true to the extent that it is indispensable.” Cathedrals—as well as temples, chapels, or the edifice that is a finished film—are structures unlike almost any other art form, with the individual and the group collectively fulfilling and supporting one another while sharing the creative authorial process.

A film of this communal nature is ideally suited to create community between its creators and viewers. The act of embodiment that is art not only compares to but can directly lead to the spiritual sociality understood as the body of Christ. In secular terms, we already understand how readily fans of a given movie quickly establish fellowship with each other. The “cult” film phenomenon is a social one in which fellow fans return to a familiar work to once again enjoy this in the company of others who also appreciate it. The word “cult” derives from cultus, meaning “worship,” suggesting a strongly spiritual and social dimension to even very secular films. There can be a binding force among those viewing or creating films, and this religious dimension is all the stronger if those viewing or creating the film share religious beliefs or covenants of service and sacrifice. Peter Fraser calls attention to the spiritual and communal potential for film and suggests a sacramental mode for movies. The sacrament ordinance memorializing Christ’s body is done with fellow believers. It is communion both with God and with the other members of the body of Christ. If the making of a film can be compared to the construction of a cathedral or temple, then the viewing of a film, Fraser suggests, can be compared to partaking of the sacrament emblems, the ritual that reaffirms the community of faith.

Considering Legacy in this light, the movie both depicts and potentially enacts community. In its creation, in its subject matter, and among those viewing it, a social and spiritual connection can exist for those who take the opportunity to reflect on the offering made (as with Christians participating in the communion ritual). Those creating or viewing a film need never consider themselves as part of a body of believers, of course, but they can; Legacy invites such connections in its content and style. A sacramental approach to experiencing film is described by Edward McNulty, a Christian who teaches film and theology seminars. He urges people to “enter the theater with the same attitude or spiritual preparation that they enter a church sanctuary.” He even suggests praying before and after the film. Consistent with the idea that a film can be the result of significant communal effort, he recommends that one “look for some sign or symbol that the same Spirit involved in the process of making the film will also speak to the hearts and minds of the audience as well.” If
a film is seen as something consecrated, rather than commercial, it opens viewers to communion with its creators; if seen as something of potential spiritual value, rather than purely as entertainment, it opens viewers to communion with other viewers. To this end, McNulty also recommends attending a film with someone else, “even better, a church group, so that they can share with and enlighten one another concerning what they have experienced. . . . ‘All of us will see more than one of us.’”

With respect to *Legacy*, the “all of us” includes fellow Latter-day Saints who see or have seen the film and who embrace the legacy it portrays. Even the very exhibition space where *Legacy* premiered promotes the idea of communion. Temple Square is itself a monument to the Mormon people, connecting visitors to the sacrifices and commitment of the pioneers who erected its granite temple. Though clearly set up to proselytize to nonmembers, Temple Square has always functioned as a site of pilgrimage for members. The viewing of its films and exhibits completes that pilgrimage, connecting returning members not just to the early Latter-day Saints but to their prior experiences in this familiar place and to all the others finding something of significance there. The grandeur of *Legacy*’s aesthetic is found not just in its panoramic scenes or its IMAX-like screen in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building, but in its position within the traditions and history of Mormon culture. Families and Church groups traveled en masse to Salt Lake City to see this film together, just as other Mormon pilgrims have come to celebrate a kind of communion with their people, present and past, when attending general conference there, viewing the square’s Christmas lights, or attending its various events.

The Legacy Theater no longer shows *Legacy*, though it did so daily for six years. Like the Mormons it portrayed in the film, it has moved on, making room first for *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd* (2000) and now *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration* (2005). Films can be made sacred in their creation or consumption, but like the questing Mormons of *Legacy*, they are always in motion, they are “cinematic” (from the Greek *kinema*, meaning “movement”). As the early Mormons relocated in the 1830s and 1840s, they did not simply change their location or increase their numbers; they evolved the various physical, organizational, and social forms that have successively embodied the LDS faith. Mormon aesthetics will continue emerging, project by project, and will change their form. But just as the Mormon people do in *Legacy*, the Mormon artistic tradition will keep its character if it continues to connect itself to the body of Saints past and present, edifying the full body of Christ.

Like other aesthetics, filmmaking based on the concept of the body of Christ will have limits, but it has the virtue of being grounded at the
core of LDS belief and in the ordinances, eternal social connections, and divine places that are most resonant with Latter-day Saints. Bodies grow and develop, and so will Mormon film methods. Mortal bodies are imperfect, but by joining together as a Christian body, those imperfections are transcended, making place for the divine. Perhaps this transcendent style is not what Schrader describes but is instead the transcendence of the individual within the suffering and sanctifying body of the Saints. Legacy’s legacy is that Latter-day Saints do find their God and approach Zion as they make sacrifices, unite themselves, and work together. They thereby build something greater than the temporary temples they must soon abandon; they build a people. As LDS filmmakers and viewers move away from entertainment or business as their primary paradigm for film and consider the artistic implications of their own theology, they will discover and evolve ever better means to simultaneously express and realize their spiritual aspirations as fellow Saints in the latter days.

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1. See, for example, Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds., Screen- ing the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995). However, neither this nor the majority of other studies explore the deeper implications of cinematic style. Even when the Journal of Popular Film and Television dedicated an entire issue to “The Catholic Imagination in Popular Film and Television” (19, no. 2 [Summer 1991]), the articles focused on thematic rather than stylistic approaches.

2. In studies of religion and film, the “Jesus Film” is a well-established genre going back to Alice Guy’s Jésus devant Pilate (1898) and including such well-known feature films as Quo Vadis (1912); Intolerance (1916); Ben Hur (1925, 1959); King of Kings (1927, 1961); The Robe (1953); The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964); The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965); Jesus Christ, Superstar (1973); Jesus of Nazareth (1977); The Last Temptation of Christ (1988); and Mel Gibson’s recent The Passion of the Christ (2004).


9. “The conception of a film, according to anyone’s common-sense definition, corresponds to that which was developed in Hollywood by the middle of the First World War.” John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 194.

10. In different settings, other cinematic norms have held sway, such as during World War II when documentary film (newsreels, propaganda films, and so forth) temporarily had cultural dominance.

11. An Edison ad of 1898–99 asserted that Edison’s Projectoscope presented “pictures so natural that life itself is no more real.” They were “so true to life as to force the observer to believe that they are viewing the reality and not the reproduction.” Quoted in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 100.


18. Although critics continue to compare Schrader’s own style to the transcendental style, he claims his films contrast with it: “I’m quite different from Bresson. The reason why I don’t make transcendental films, the reason I don’t have transcendental style, is that I believe in something that is anathema or contrary to the whole notion of transcendental cinema. I have my roots in psychological realism and audience identification with character, whereas the whole notion of transcendental style is based on repudiating psychological realism.” Michael Bliss
21. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 158.
22. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 163.
23. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 163.
25. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 63–64.
26. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 22.
27. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 65.
28. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 68.
29. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 69.
30. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 39.
31. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 69.
32. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 69.
33. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 10.
34. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 70.
35. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 49.
36. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 44.
37. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 82.
38. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 78.
40. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 79.
41. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 51.
42. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 49.
43. Fraser, Images of the Passion, 173.
44. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 22.
45. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 65.
46. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 68.
47. Schrader, Transcendental Style, 69.
53. Randy Astle describes a similar communal aesthetic in *Angie* and other films of Dean Duncan’s Fit for the Kingdom series. These honor those “of the last wagon” (quoting J. Reuben Clark’s famous discourse) in their “portraits of average yet remarkable Latter-day Saints.” Astle says these films represent “not just a single film or even a type or style of film, but a mosaic of films. Each individual piece interlocks with, then complements and balances the others. They are short enough and sparse enough that no individual title can give a complete perspective of its subject’s life, but together the films can and do allow just such a comprehensive glimpse inside modern Mormonism in its totality. . . . *Angie*, therefore, calls attention to the beauty of the entire body of the Saints, of *Emanuel* and *Lloya* and *Heather* and the others—of each one of us.” Randy Astle, review of *Angie*, in this issue, *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007): 324–30.


56. A film set can be a place where a director plays dictator, or it can be a place where sacrifice and consecration make the resulting film a sacred endeavor. Brigham Young University professor Tom Russell directed a film, *Mr. Dung-beetle* (2005), during the last months of his wife’s life. Despite her failing health she wished for her husband to complete the film, which he could not have done without her support and others’ contributions and commitment. Reportedly, this working and suffering together created a closeness among cast and crew; it gave the film a greater purpose.

57. See Fraser, *Images of the Passion*, for a treatment of the liturgical and ritual functions of cinema within the “sacramental mode in film.”


59. McNulty, “Spirituality and Film.”

60. McNulty, “Spirituality and Film.”